

GAVIN HYMAN
University of Lancaster

A review essay of William L. Sachs, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 264 pp. \$99.00. ISBN: 0521851203.

The beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era witnessed a phenomenon unseen for many years, a schism within one of the largest Christian churches in the world. The church in question was, of course, the Anglican Communion, and it is perhaps reflective of the nature of Anglicanism itself that the visible manifestation of its schism was somewhat blurred. There was no unequivocal split, with two clearly identifiable churches emerging as a result; on the contrary, the process was, in some ways, rather subtle and not immediately obvious to the outsider. It became known euphemistically as 'realignment' and seemed in practice to mean that the Anglican Communion was splitting up without actually splitting up. This is not to suggest, however, that the process itself was in any way soft centred; on the contrary, the nature of the disagreement at the heart of the breach was acrimonious, vicious at times, and perhaps the most profound in the history of the Anglican Communion. The muted outward manifestation of the schism is rather to be understood as being determined by the structures of Anglicanism itself. Indeed, it is the distinctive and idiosyncratic shape of Anglicanism that may be called in aid to explain both the origins of the disagreement and the outward form of the resulting split.

The immediate cause, as is well known, was the question of the legitimacy of homosexuality vis a vis the Christian tradition. This in itself marks it out as unusual in relation to previous schisms in the Christian church, most of which were caused by disagreements in relation to questions of fundamental theological doctrines or methodology. Very few have their origins in the arena of ethics, and fewer still have been ignited by questions of sexual ethics. But as has often been pointed out, the issue of homosexuality is, in many ways, an epiphenomenal manifestation of much deeper disagreements relating to questions of theological methodology, doctrinal authority, and Biblical hermeneutics. The disagreement over homosexuality is unintelligible without reference to disagreements at these deeper levels. But if this is so, it makes the Anglican furore over homosexuality all the more puzzling. For disagreements on theological methodology, doctrinal authority, and Biblical interpretation have long persisted, even within the bounds of Anglicanism itself. Indeed, it has often been said that one of the defining features of Anglicanism has been its ability to encompass a range of divergent views on such questions. The controversy thus raises several questions that are ripe for discussion. Why has this quintessentially Anglican comprehensiveness

suddenly broken down? Why has it done so on the specific issue of homosexuality? Why at this time? And why has the Anglican church, in particular, been afflicted by divisive disagreements on an issue that is potentially just as divisive for any other church in the contemporary world?

Two books of quite distinct genres have recently addressed these questions. Stephen Bates's *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* was published in 2004.¹ It is a high quality work of investigative journalism written by a long-standing correspondent for the national British newspaper, *The Guardian*. Bates takes us on a detailed narrative excursion through the various twists and turns of the road to schism. Although, as he tells us, he is a Roman Catholic, and his wife and family are Evangelical Protestants, it is very clear that his own sympathies lie in a liberal direction, at least on the question of homosexuals within the church. Nonetheless, his portrayal of events and individuals appears fair and balanced, and is based on extensive interviews with prominent figures on both sides of the divide. For those seeking a narrative account of the events by which the Anglican Communion rent itself asunder over the issue of homosexuality, Bates's book will serve them well. But although it gives a general sense of some of the theological principles underlying the debates, it by no means attempts to provide a detailed theological and historical account of the background to the crisis, as Bates himself would be the first to admit. Having read this book, the interested enquirer would certainly be much better informed about the sequence of events that constituted the controversy, but may still be left with a sense of puzzlement with respect to those central questions raised by the furore and which we have identified above.

William L. Sachs attempts to address some of these questions in his *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism* (2009).² Sachs is an American Episcopalian priest and has written extensively on the nature and identity of Anglicanism. He is convinced that in order to understand what is at stake in this debate, it is necessary to go beyond a narrative of the sequence of events by which the crisis is constituted. He says that "Mere description of the poised religious and cultural forces cannot explain why the conflict emerged, nor why it galvanized such heated convictions and highly motivated advocates, nor why the Anglican Communion found itself in the vortex" (7). To this end, he places the debate over homosexuality into a much wider historical context, which stretches back to the earliest days of Christianity itself.

Indeed, he discerns echoes of the current split in the Donatist schism of the fourth century. Donatus, about whom little is known, was proclaimed the rival or 'true' bishop of Carthage, and he and his followers separated from the Catholic Church. The process leading to this final breach was an extended one and arose from deep dissatisfaction that Mensurius and his successor Caecilian, bishop of Carthage, were perceived to be too willing to

¹Stephen Bates, *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

²William L. Sachs, *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Subsequent references to this book will be made in the text in parentheses.

compromise with the prevailing political regime. This was seen to be consequent upon Constantine's conversion to Christianity and the effective transformation of Christianity into an official state religion. To the Donatists, as Sachs puts it, the church's "faith seemingly became dilute, its morality lax, its accommodation to power and culture too convenient. To Constantine and his Christian supporters, the church could be the basis of imperial unity; but to others this would lead it toward compromise with the world" (55). For Sachs, the Donatist split established a pattern that would be repeated time and again in the Christian church generally and in the Anglican church in particular. In times of societal, cultural or political upheaval, a movement within the church (usually marginal in relation to the hierarchies of power) comes increasingly to feel that the church as a whole has betrayed the 'true faith' by making too many compromises with the surrounding culture.

After his discussion of the early church and the Donatists in chapter 2, Sachs turns his attention to the history of disputes internal to the Anglican church in chapters 3 to 8. These range from the protests of the non-juring bishops in the wake of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 to the rise of John Wesley's Methodist movement and its eventual departure from the mainstream body of the Church of England in around 1784. In chapters 5 and 6, he identifies another strand integral to the current debate, namely, the expansion of Anglicanism beyond the British Isles, a process that, for the most part, was concurrent with the spread of the British Empire, first in the North American colonies and then more widely in what is sometimes called the 'second' British Empire which reached its height in the Victorian era. Integral to this process was the adaptation of Anglicanism to local circumstances, but without there being a central or overarching structure of theological authority that could mediate between the local variants of Anglicanism that emerged. Furthermore, in many parts of what Sachs terms the 'global south', the new forms of indigenous Anglicanism tended to emphasise a 'high' understanding of the authority of scriptural texts. There were numerous reasons for this, although cultural factors, particularly in parts of Africa and South Asia, appeared to encourage such a development. Parallel with these movements was the process of what Sachs, in chapter 7, terms the 'rise of liberalism' in the 'global north' particularly from the nineteenth-century onwards. Thus, the scene was beginning to be set for some sort of potential clash. With the Anglican impulse towards an expression of its faith in various and diverse indigenous settings, a situation of global theological pluralism was being created, but without any clearly defined and overarching structures of mediation or authority.

Furthermore, quite distinct and increasingly divergent conceptions of Anglicanism were being developed in the 'global north' and the 'global south' respectively, and this inevitably gave rise to questions as to whether one of them represented the 'true church' and the other some form of betrayal, a process which Sachs addresses in chapter 8. Initially, this process of questioning took place within the churches of the 'global north'; Sachs highlights the examples of John Henry Newman's departure from the Church of England in 1844 and George David Cummins's secession from the Episcopal Church of the USA in 1873. Cummins believed that the Episcopal Church had betrayed its Protestant heritage, whereas Newman believed that the Church of England had betrayed its Catholic heritage. However justified

their respective analyses, the blame for these betrayals was attributed by both of them to the growing influence of liberalism, which they each believed to be seducing the church away from its true vocation.

In subsequent years, such sentiments were to be taken up by evangelicals and other conservatives in England and the USA, and they were to make common cause with Anglicans in the 'global south', who increasingly began to think in similar terms in relation to the Anglican Communion as a whole. Thus, some form of confrontation appeared to be increasingly likely in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, the only question being which particular issue would be sufficiently charged to galvanize players on both sides of the divide to take up a sufficiently combative stance. There were certainly several contenders: the ordination of women priests, indulgence towards divorce and remarriage, biblical and doctrinal laxity. But these issues proved to be either insufficiently unifying (opposition to women priests, for instance, was not shared across the evangelical-conservative spectrum) or too diffuse and unfocused (for example, the case of biblical and doctrinal laxity) to serve as sufficiently emotive rallying calls. But there were no such impediments in the case of the legitimizing of practicing gay relationships, an issue that became all the more specific and focused when the consecration of a practicing gay bishop became a real prospect.

According to the broad contours of Sachs' analysis, therefore, the issue of homosexuality provided the occasion for the outlet of an explosive pressure which had been building in the Anglican Communion for many decades, many centuries even, and which in and of itself had nothing to do with homosexuality as such. Thus, his central contention is that the Anglican crisis over homosexuality is both a repetition of prior disagreements with similar dynamics and also unique by virtue of its intensity, cultural context and divisive capacity. He says:

The crisis over homosexuality is not novel, for there are important prior instances of conflict over the moral nature of the church and its leadership. Nor is this conflict unprecedented for Anglicans. Tension between the local and the general aspects of Christian belief and practice is apparent in Anglican discussions of appropriate ways to adapt church life and leadership to new realities. Indeed the emergence of ideological factions against the backdrop of broad public uncertainty is also a recurring aspect of such crises; indeed, it is the most important of all. But the energetic focus on homosexuality at a time when Anglicanism is being reshaped by global South influences makes this conflict distinctive and profound. The constellation of prior patterns and unprecedented factors suggest that Anglicanism and perhaps wider swaths of Christianity around the globe face a definitive moment. (28)

It follows from the shape of Sachs' analysis that very little of his book discusses the specific issue of homosexuality. In fact, only chapters 1 and 9 – the first and last chapters – directly concern themselves with it. This need not be cause for complaint as it is an inevitable consequence of Sachs' line of analysis. As we have noted, his contention is that the furore over

homosexuality is a contingent manifestation of much deeper divides. In unearthing the genealogical roots of these divides, it is necessarily the case that the bulk of his narrative is concerned with issues other than that of homosexuality. At the same time, one wishes that more connections could have been made between these historical archaeological digs and the particular ways in which they shed light on current debates. One too often gets the sense of being lost in the thickets of narrative detail while losing sight of the analytical thread that has led one into them in the first place. Therefore, at times, one longs for a sword of incisive analytical judgement to cut through the swaths of discursive history that sometimes threaten to overwhelm. This would be more bearable was it not for the fact that several of these historical surveys appear to be based on so limited a range of sources. The discussion of the origins of liberalism, for instance—on which there is a plethora of published sources—appears to be based almost exclusively on Bernard Reardon's 1971 book, *From Coleridge to Gore: A Century of Religious Thought in Britain*. So too, the discussion of John Henry Newman—on whom there is likewise no shortage of commentary—is based almost entirely on Frank M. Turner's study. Furthermore, on the occasions when these historical studies are leavened by insights on the relevance to homosexuality, these often take the form of telling us that “Homosexuality was not the basis of the Donatist controversy” (59) or that in Gilbert Burnet's *A Discourse of the Pastoral Care* (1692), there was no “reference to sexual behavior and especially to homosexuality” (77); or that in the eighteenth century, “in no sense did Evangelicals focus condemnations on homosexuality” (101). These observations become more irritating with each repetition, no doubt because they are surely as anachronistic as they are otiose.

These caveats aside, Sachs has undoubtedly done us a great service by placing the Anglican split over homosexuality in the context of a broad but specifically Anglican historical perspective. Sachs' central contention that the debate cannot be understood solely in terms of the issue of homosexuality itself is surely correct. He amply demonstrates the ways in which prior developments within the Church of England and, later, the Anglican Communion gave rise to tensions and contradictions that sooner or later were bound to come explosively to the surface. It so happened that the debate around homosexuality provided the occasion for this explosion to occur, but in other circumstances the catalyst might well have been different. At this point, however, it may be helpful to highlight some of the most pertinent and insightful aspects of Sachs's analysis, as well as to supplement these with some further relevant reflections. I shall argue that perhaps the most significant factor in the Anglican crisis over homosexuality is one that is given scant attention by Sachs, namely, the historical failure of the Church of England to export its traditional commitment to doctrinal comprehensiveness to the wider Anglican Communion overseas.

* * * *

The distinctive shape and structure of the contemporary Anglican Communion can only be understood in terms of the idiosyncratic character of the English Reformation by means of which the Church of England was born. It was quite unlike any other process of Reformation that had recently

occurred on the mainland continent of Europe, not least in terms of the striking degree of continuity that the new Church shared with the old. There were all sorts of ways in which this was so, but perhaps one of the most visible and striking manifestations of this was the fact that the English Cathedrals survived the Reformation with not only their buildings but also their fundamental character, structure, and way of life intact.³ This was unusual, and was to be explained by the fact that the reformed Church of England had retained its Episcopal structure, and, indeed, the threefold catholic order of bishops, priests, and deacons. It was a further indication of the intrinsic conservatism of the English Reformation that bishops were inconceivable without their Cathedrals. The English Reformation, then, was distinct in that it neither fully embraced continental Protestantism nor entirely rejected its Catholic inheritance. Although there were initially some oscillations between the latent Catholicism of Henry VIII (until 1547), the extreme Protestantism of Edward VI (1547-53), and the aborted attempt to restore Roman Catholicism on the part of Mary I (1553-58), such oscillation was finally stilled by the religious settlement of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), the chief characteristics of which were its toleration and comprehensiveness. This was captured by two quotations attributed to Elizabeth I: "There is only one Jesus Christ and all the rest is a dispute over trifles," and, in a remark allegedly addressed to a Puritan divine in Oxford in 1566, "Mr Doctor, this loose gown becomes you mighty well; I wonder your notions be so narrow."⁴

The reformed Church of England was established as a *via media* between Catholicism and Protestantism, even if John Henry Newman and others of the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement thought that it had never been realized in practice. Furthermore, this *via media* was by no means narrowly defined; the Elizabethan religious settlement was intended to be liberally interpreted so as to accommodate a broad range of theological positions within its parameters. One may wonder whether this impulse towards a broad comprehensiveness was theologically or politically motivated. I shall return to this question in due course, although it is worth remembering that these two spheres were then much more intertwined than they were later to be. The primary impulse was to provide for a framework of overarching religious unity within which there could be a fairly wide range of religious plurality.

In this respect, the official religious establishment of England was not as far apart from the disestablished relationship between church and state in the USA, as is often supposed. In the latter case, the primary concern was not, as is sometimes said, to make the state a religion-free zone, but, once again, to establish a framework of overarching religious unity, this time through the tenets of 'natural' religion, which superseded denominational affiliation and to which all could assent. Within this unified framework, a religious plurality was envisaged in which believers would be able to adhere to their own denominations without any one of them being favoured over the others.⁵ Far from marking a radical break from the religious settlement in

³See Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation of Cathedrals: Cathedrals in English Society, 1485-1603* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴Quoted in Bates, *A Church at War*, 109, 12.

⁵See John P. Clayton, *Religions, Reasons and Gods: Essays in Cross-Cultural Philosophy*

England, it was—on the contrary— a continuation of the same broad policy by another means. But as far as the Church of England was concerned, although due obeisance was paid to the principle of episcopal authority, there were no tight definitions of doctrinal belief. Unity was derived from a common acceptance of the authority of Scripture, from the practice of common worship as embodied in the *Book of Common Prayer* and by a general adherence (never rigorously enforced) to “The Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith” drawn up in 1562. There was no Anglican equivalent of the doctrinal definitions propagated by the Roman Catholic *magisterium*, or papal pronouncements, or Vatican Councils. This tendency towards latitudinarianism was perpetuated through subsequent centuries. The nineteenth-century in particular saw a number of trials for heresy within the Church of England but, in each case, judgements were given which interpreted the bounds of legitimacy in a comprehensive manner.

One striking example of this came when, in 1848 the High Church Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter, refused to institute the evangelical George Gorham to a living within his diocese on the grounds that the latter held heretical theological views on the nature of baptism. Gorham appealed against Phillpotts's decision to the Court of Arches, an ecclesiastical court, and on losing this case, appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. The Judicial Committee as convened for this case, comprised both bishops and secular judges. They made clear that their remit was not to pronounce on the theological correctness of Gorham's views, but simply to determine the legal question of whether his views could be thought to lie legitimately within the parameters of the Church of England— as defined by its scriptures, worship and rubrics. The Judicial Committee eventually found in favour of Gorham, but, critically, they did so without in any way rejecting the contrary theological views of Phillpotts.

Such developments undoubtedly had direct repercussions in the debate over homosexuality that rent the Anglican Communion asunder in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The sixteenth-century religious settlement of the Church of England was such that it allowed for a certain degree of religious plurality, and it meant also that there were no institutional structures in place that could adjudicate definitively on antithetically opposed doctrinal positions. As the clash between the High Church Phillpotts and the evangelical Gorham showed, the Church of England's institutional structures as well as its temper of mind was to respond to doctrinal strife by interpreting its parameters of legitimacy as widely as possible, thus allowing for conflicting doctrinal views to co-exist even if they did not always do so peacefully. But such a solution, of course, was efficacious only if the disputants were willing to live with such mutual tolerance. Historically, most disputants were so willing, but if the day were to come when they were not, it was by no means clear what the potential outcome would be. Faced with insurmountable disagreement and an unwillingness to countenance co-existence, no one quite knew who could expel whom, who could anathematize whom or how such deadlock would be resolved. Such tantalizing uncertainty came to the fore in the aftermath of the final judgement in favour of Gorham, when Bishop Phillpotts wavered

of Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), especially chapter 2.

and began to intimate that he was not prepared to countenance the traditional Anglican commitment to co-existence.

This is fascinating for our purposes because his initial reaction was suggestive of the form in which irreducible internal disagreement might be manifested, and also because it served as a remarkably accurate prefiguring of the later process of 're-alignment' that was enacted in the dispute over homosexuality. As the historian Owen Chadwick relays it, in the wake of the Privy Council's judgement in favour of Gorham, Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter published "a powerful and sarcastic letter" to Archbishop Sumner of Canterbury "repudiating the judgment, declaring that he would not obey it, and threatening (though without mentioning Sumner's name) to withhold communion from Sumner if he obeyed it; the idea of the Bishop of Exeter excommunicating the Archbishop of Canterbury caused amusement, indignation and alarm."⁶ As it turned out, this threat was never realized, but in making it Phillpotts had identified the only possible recourse for those within the church who were unable to reconcile themselves with those with whom they disagreed, namely, the withdrawal of communion. This was, of course, precisely the action to which some churches in the 'global south' as well as in some places of the 'global north' were to resort when the Anglican dispute over homosexuality became uncontrollable.

Phillpotts's threat is probably the closest the Anglican Church would have come to doctrinal schism were it not for the spread of Anglicanism far beyond the bounds of the British Isles. Such global expansion is clearly a *sine qua non* for the Anglican split over homosexuality. For Sachs, the most critical aspect of this development was the impulse towards the development of 'indigenous' forms of Anglicanism, as the title of chapter 6 makes clear. The traditional malleability of Anglicanism was here exploited so as to allow for the development of specifically *local* variants of Anglicanism, which were adapted to particular circumstances, cultures, beliefs, and outlooks. This 'localizing' manner of expansion could perhaps be explained in terms of the way in which it mirrored both ecclesiastical and political realities. Ecclesiastically, it appeared to reflect the internal pluralism of the mother church itself. For a church whose distinctive feature was its latitudinarian inclusion, it would have seemed natural for this pluralism to have been perpetuated as that church moved outwards into increasingly diverse cultural settings. Politically, it seemed to reflect the process of imperial expansion itself. It has often been said that whereas the French Empire strove to turn its colonial subjects effectively into overseas citizens of metropolitan France, the British Empire traditionally sought to work with local customs, tribal leaders, and indigenous structures in a way that was perceived to be a more effective method of imperial control. By encouraging the development of 'indigenous' forms of Anglicanism, therefore, ecclesiastical policy was developing with—rather than against—the grain of wider imperial policy.

Critically, however, this process of indigenous expansion and the resulting pluralization of Anglicanism were not counter-balanced by the establishment of any substantive centralized authority. Furthermore, such authority as

⁶Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Vol. I* (London: A & C Black, 1966), 263.

emanated from the archiepiscopacy of Canterbury was further diluted by the formal recognition of the autonomy of the gradually emerging provinces of what was to become the worldwide Anglican Communion. With this development, the authority of Canterbury—always slight in any case—was replaced by the mutual dependency of being 'in communion' with the See of Canterbury. Once again, the fact that centralized institutional structures of authority were not developed may be understood in terms of the way in which this reflected both ecclesiastical and political circumstances. The Phillpotts-Gorham controversy had vividly exposed the nebulousness of central authority in the Church of England. Whatever difficulties this sometimes entailed, it was nonetheless seen as being one of the hallmarks of the Anglican settlement. For the Church of England, or even the Archbishop of Canterbury, to impose a centralized authority over the burgeoning Anglican Communion would have been viewed as being distinctly alien and un-Anglican.

But again, this ecclesiastical phenomenon also reflected political developments in the wider Empire, not least when that Empire began slowly to evolve into a Commonwealth of Nations. This political process began with the forging of a new 'Dominion' status, which was first granted to Canada in 1867. A 'Dominion' was conceived as an integral part of the British Empire, owing allegiance to the Crown, but with complete autonomy in its internal affairs and, in time, in its external affairs. The same status was later granted to Australia in 1901, New Zealand in 1907, South Africa in 1910, and the Irish Free State in 1922. The status of the Dominions in relation to each other and to Great Britain was formalized in the 'Balfour Declaration' of 1926, later enshrined in legislation by the Statute of Westminster of 1931, this being widely regarded as marking the legal birth of the modern British Commonwealth. The Balfour Declaration asserted that the United Kingdom and the Dominions were "autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth."⁷ Members of the Commonwealth were, thus, to be subordinated to no central authority, and the basis of their union was the symbolic one of their common allegiance to the Crown. The development of the Anglican Communion proceeded on closely parallel lines, so much so that the Balfour Declaration need be only minimally adapted in order to produce a remarkably apt and accurate description of the relationship between the provinces of the Anglican Communion. Just as the Commonwealth was a novel political experiment, so too the Anglican Communion was a novel ecclesiastical experiment insofar as it was a worldwide church with no central authority, a non-hierarchical church united only by sacramental communion and mutual dependence.

As the Church of England expanded itself into a worldwide Anglican Communion, it projected its own features onto a global setting. The "triumph of indigenous Anglicanism" and the accompanying lack of any central and overarching authority were by no means necessary concessions to

⁷Quoted in Harold Plaskitt and Percy Jordan, *Government of Britain, Commonwealth Countries and Dependencies*, 8th ed. (London: University Tutorial Press, 1963), 274.

the process of global expansion; on the contrary, they were integral features of the Church of England itself, now writ large. But if this was so, it is also to be said that this was potentially an explosive combination. The proliferation of a plurality of indigenous forms of Anglicanism (which, as Sachs points out, was coterminous with the ascendancy of 'liberalism' in parts of the global north) was set to become dangerously divisive in the absence of any overarching authority that could adjudicate between them. Within the bounds of the Church of England, we have seen that the overarching Anglican temper of a broad comprehensiveness guarded against an outbreak of irreparable schism. Therefore, it might be thought that in the interests of the peaceful amity of the Anglican Communion as a whole, it was essential that the establishment of indigenous forms of Anglicanism and the non-establishment of a central authority be accompanied by the perpetuation of the Anglican ideal of broad comprehensiveness. And yet this was the one feature of Anglicanism that singularly failed to be projected onto the Communion as a whole. Sachs makes little of this particular failing, but it could be argued that this is the single most significant factor in explaining the contemporary Anglican crisis over homosexuality. While Sachs is quite right to identify the various explanatory factors that he does, it is quite possible that the problems caused by these factors may well have been contained and the crisis averted if the ideal of comprehensiveness had been as universally established as were the ideals of internal plurality and dispersed authority.

Why, then, was the ideal of comprehensiveness not so established in the wider Anglican Communion beyond the Church of England? There are, I believe, two main answers to this question. The first was that, historically, Anglican comprehensiveness tended to be justified in Erastian terms rather than in specifically theological terms. Those who felt moved to defend the wide doctrinal and liturgical parameters of the Church of England against what was perceived as threats from narrowness or sectarianism did so on the basis that the church—as the national established church—had an obligation to the entire nation, and thus also had an obligation to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. Such apologetics were perhaps given quintessential expression by Archibald Tait, Bishop of London from 1856-68 and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1868-82. Caricatured in the contemporary press as being an 'earnest and liberal' prelate, he embodied the ideal of Anglican Erastian inclusiveness. As Owen Chadwick puts it:

Tait, throughout his life, saw the Church of England as the national church. Its duty to the nation came before its duty to Catholicism, or rather, its highest duty to Catholicism lay in its duty to the nation. Towards the nation it must seek to be as comprehensive as possible. Therefore he had no desire for new doctrinal definitions, nor declarations, nor condemnations for heresy. Tait's mind and conduct showed how the establishment made for comprehension and for liberality.⁸

Tait's sensibilities, in this respect, were representative of many other bishops and theologians throughout the centuries. One searches with difficulty for arguments defending comprehensiveness on the basis that, establishment

⁸Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Vol. II* (London: A & C Black, 1970), 85.

apart, this was the theologically justified and proper thing for the Anglican Church to embody. Whatever the merits or limitations of this approach, it meant that, in practical terms, an indelible mental link had been made between establishment and comprehensiveness, such that the comprehensiveness was contingent upon establishment. Consequently, the export and perpetuation of such comprehensiveness to and in the wider Anglican Church, beyond the Church of England, was contingent on whether those burgeoning churches in the wider world would themselves be established in relation to the state.

There was some equivocation as to the status of the newly planted Anglican churches overseas. Certainly, the status of the Episcopal Church in the United States was unequivocally settled after political independence. But in the overseas colonies of the British Empire, the status of the Anglican churches in relation to the colonial establishments was unclear. Often, people assumed and behaved as though the Anglican Church in British colonies was established, even if this had never been legally settled. But by the middle of the Victorian era, a high profile legal judgement was to settle the issue beyond all doubt.

The Colenso judgement of 1865 was one in which many theological, ecclesiastical and legal issues were at stake, and the question of whether colonial churches were established was by no means at the forefront of most people's minds. Sachs briefly discusses the career of the colonial bishop, John William Colenso, but he does so in relation to the development of 'indigenous' Anglicanism, a process in which Colenso was a central figure with respect to the question of the established status of colonial churches. The 'Colenso controversy' arose out of Colenso's work as a biblical critic, which was just one of his many and multifarious ecclesiastical activities. Appointed as the first Bishop of Natal in Southern Africa, Colenso began to establish himself as a biblical critic of a peculiar kind, drawing on both the recent research of German scholarship and his own expertise as a mathematical scholar. The result was a series of published bible commentaries that argued that much of the Old Testament should be regarded as legend or myth and certainly not as historical fact. For this, he was condemned for heresy and ejected from his bishopric by Bishop Gray of Cape Town.

Colenso appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the same body that had heard the appeal of Gorham some years earlier. But whereas the Gorham case had reached the Judicial Committee via a series of ecclesiastical courts, Colenso took an entirely different route. He pursued his case not through ecclesiastical courts but as citizen of the Empire who had been wrongfully treated. In contrast with the Gorham case, the Judicial Committee did not at all consider the question of whether Colenso's views could be regarded as falling legitimately within the doctrinal parameters of the Church of England, but instead only considered the purely technical and legal question of whether the Bishop of Cape Town had any jurisdiction over the Bishop of Natal. Therefore, the case struck at the heart of the question of whether Anglican churches in British colonies could, in any sense, be regarded as 'established.' The Judicial Committee unequivocally declared that they could not. As James Morris has summarized it:

The Church was part of the constitution of England, [Colenso] argued, but not of South Africa, and Gray was no more entitled to charge him than he was to charge Bishop Gray. He appealed to the Crown, and in 1865 the Privy Council decided in his favour. The Crown, it decreed, "had no power to constitute a bishopric in a colony, which had its own independent legislature." The Church of England was not a part of the constitution in any colonial settlement, and its ministers were merely members of a voluntary association, without legal power or immunity. Bishop Gray's metropolitan authority was therefore spurious, and his punishment of Colenso null and void.⁹

Henceforth, there could no longer be any doubt about the legal status of Anglican churches in British colonies; in the twentieth century, the question in any case became academic as those colonies began moving towards full political independence. As it was unequivocally the case that Anglican churches overseas were in no sense established, it was not perceived as imperative for them to perpetuate the Church of England's traditional commitment to doctrinal comprehensiveness and inclusion. Such commitments, it was implicitly believed, were attributes of the Church of England in its peculiar status as a *national* church, rather than an integral aspect of Anglican identity as such. Such a conviction need not have taken hold. If Anglican bishops and theologians had made a robust *theological* case for comprehensiveness and inclusion as being of the essence of Anglicanism, things may well have been different, but, as we have observed, this was precisely what they failed to do; the ramifications of this failure were to be far greater than anyone could have anticipated.

But this raises the question of what a *theological* justification of Anglican comprehensiveness might look like. And this, in turn, brings us to the role of the central figure in the global Anglican debate over homosexuality, Rowan Williams. Sachs, in fact, says very little about the part played by Williams, but we might venture to suggest that his role is pivotal and worthy of extended discussion—in particular, in three decreasingly obvious but increasingly significant ways. First and most obvious, Williams was Archbishop of Canterbury at this particular time, which placed him at the centre of events and put upon him a most onerous burden and critical responsibility. Secondly, he has made a significant and influential contribution to the debate on homosexuality in the form of an essay, "The Body's Grace", originally delivered as a lecture to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in London in 1989, long before Williams became Archbishop and long before the Anglican debate on homosexuality had grown to such obsessive proportions.¹⁰

One of the striking aspects of this essay is the way in which it transcends

⁹James Morris, *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), 272.

¹⁰See Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace" in Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309-21.

both of the polarized positions that constitute the current acrimonious debate. Williams refuses to address the question in terms of a blanket acceptance of the equal legitimacy of homosexuality in relation to marriage over against a blanket rejection of it. For Williams, these questions cannot be addressed in an abstract disembodied way, but only in the concrete particularities of life. Viewed thus, it may well be that the character of a particular homosexual relationship is one in which the love of God may be discerned. Equally, it may also be the case that in a particular ecclesiastically and legally sanctioned marriage, the love of God may be obscured and perhaps even distorted. For Williams, it is the character of specific relationships that should be at issue for Christians; it is this question that is obscured by abstract assertions that heterosexual marriage is 'right' and heterosexual relationships 'wrong.' Eugene F. Rogers has described Williams's essay as "the best ten pages written about sexuality in the twentieth century," and has said that it repays several careful readings.¹¹ But it is a particular instantiation of a much broader theological methodology that Williams has been developing, both before and after the publication of this particular essay, and it is this that leads to the third way in which Williams is so pivotal for current debates.

Williams has never written a complete systematic theology, but this does not mean that he has not developed a consistent and distinctive theological methodology. On the contrary, the consistency of his theological method is what binds together his many books, articles, and papers published on an extraordinarily wide range of theological topics over the years.¹² In this method, I suggest we find embodied what the Church of England has lacked for many years, namely, a distinctively *Anglican* practice of theology and, more particularly, a theological embodiment of the principle of comprehensiveness, which I have suggested was a hallmark of Anglicanism, but which fell victim to the process of global expansion. In making this claim about the character of Williams's theology, however, it is important to clarify what is *not* being claimed. For one thing, this is not to claim that his theology is an instance of theological 'liberalism'. Although his stand on certain issues (such as homosexuality) may loosely (and perhaps unhelpfully) be described as 'liberal', over the years he has taken a consistently critical line on 'liberal' theological approaches to such central doctrinal questions as the incarnation or religious pluralism; in important respects, and in contrast to liberal theology, Williams has remained rooted in doctrinal orthodoxy. Furthermore, he has been sharply critical of the liberal theological methodologies of, for instance, John Spong in the United States and John Hick in the United Kingdom. Neither should his theology be understood as advocating a 'bland tolerance' of diverse perspectives accompanied by unwillingness to take unequivocal stands on contentious questions. On the contrary, he has always insisted on the theological necessity of staking a claim and proclaiming truth, even when (perhaps especially when) doing so is uncomfortable, difficult, or dangerous. His intervention on the question of homosexuality may again be viewed as an instance of this. Critically, however, Williams understands such claim staking as taking place in the

¹¹Ibid., 309-310.

¹²For a representative collection of his writings, see Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

context of a wider backdrop of which we are a part and which we cannot fully control. What is important here is a particular understanding of the relationship between such claim staking and this wider backdrop.

In this respect, Williams has been deeply influenced by the philosophy of Hegel and by the work of contemporary Hegelians such as Gillian Rose.¹³ In particular, the Hegelian conception of the System is integral to Williams's thought. Rose has observed that, "Absolute knowledge is a path which must be continually traversed, re-collecting the forms of consciousness and the forms of science. This idea of a whole which cannot be grasped in one moment or in one statement for it must be experienced is the idea of the system."¹⁴ Commenting on this, Williams has observed that, for Rose, "every moment of recognition is a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a *position*. The truth lies in the 'system,' which is *not* the theory that the mind can possess at one moment, but the entirety of the path, the project, of critical dissolution of the positional and partial definition."¹⁵ Particular forms of consciousness are thus internally related to but are not to be equated with the universal System, which itself, as a whole, cannot be pre-judged. There is, it may be said, a teleology in reflection, but:

the *telos* is not *representable* (not present) in the structure of any given historical consciousness or set of consciousnesses, not a meaning which a speaker or writer could communicate as a piece of communicable information ... Therefore all that is *said* about this *telos* has a necessarily quasi-fictional character: it has the negative force of insisting that we don't take for granted *any* level of dualism between self and world, the perceived and the real, the concept and the "brute fact" and so on.¹⁶

Such Hegelian insights are central to Williams's theological method but, for him, this should by no means be thought of as a theological concession to secular philosophy.¹⁷ On the contrary, in this specific respect, Williams believes that Hegel is bringing to light a central Christian conviction, namely, that human knowledge is qualitatively different from divine knowledge. This means that while theological doctrines are in a certain sense 'revealed' and 'true', there is also a sense in which they are provisional, given the fact that the Eschaton has yet to arrive. In this time, which is between times, we see through a glass darkly, from our finite creaturely perspective, a perspective that is simultaneously necessary and inadequate. If this is so, then theological disagreements are to be expected and, indeed, are perhaps inevitable. The challenge is for these disagreements to engage each other, in

¹³See, for instance, Rowan Williams, "Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity" in Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), 72-80, "Logic and Spirit in Hegel" in Phillip Blond (ed.), *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), 116-30 and "Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose" *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 3-22.

¹⁴Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981), 182.

¹⁵Williams, "Between Politics and Metaphysics", 10.

¹⁶Williams, "Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity", 75-76.

¹⁷For several lines of analysis that converge to make this point, see Williams, "Logic and Spirit in Hegel."

the hope and expectation that this very encounter of each with its other will be a site of revelation, that the participants in this encounter will themselves grow in truth. Truth, in other words, is something for which we labour and in which we grow, rather than a static entity that can be grasped or pre-judged.

It is not possible here to do justice to the complexity and subtlety of Rowan Williams's theological methodology. But on the basis of what has been said, we at least get some indication of how his theology may be understood as constituting a theological rationale for the Anglican ideal of comprehensiveness. Doctrinal pluralism is to be embraced, not on the basis of a bland commitment to 'tolerance' nor, instrumentally, on the basis of the church's national and established status, but because such differences should be read as a means by which we may grow in truth. This does not, of course, imply a commitment to relativism, to the view that all views within the Anglican Communion are 'equally valid'. On the contrary, one must continue to stake a claim, as indeed Williams himself did on the issue of homosexuality in the days before he became Archbishop. But it does mean that one should hesitate before equating one's understanding of truth with a 'God's eye' view of truth. As fallen creatures in an imperfect world, to make such an equation would be too egregious a presumption. The challenge is to remain committed to one's conception of truth while engaging those with whom one disagrees. Provided that the participants in such an engagement are themselves united in their common quest for truth, such an engagement may itself become a site of revelation.

I have suggested that the single most significant factor in explaining the contemporary Anglican crisis over homosexuality was the failure of the Church of England to export its ideal of comprehensiveness to the wider Anglican Communion. This, in turn, is to be explained by the fact that Anglicanism failed to develop a theological (as opposed to an Erastian) justification and rationale for such comprehensiveness. This, I am suggesting, is what the theology of Rowan Williams provides. If this is so, then it would seem that the Anglican Communion is singularly fortunate in its Archbishop of Canterbury at this particular time. For those with ears to hear, the theology of its own leader potentially provides the Anglican Communion with a theological way through its current predicament over homosexuality, even if all the indications currently are that this is a solution that has, tragically, come too late.

©Gavin Hyman.

Hyman, Gavin. "Review Essay of William L. Sachs' *Homosexuality and the Crisis of Anglicanism*," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 11 no. 2 (Spring 2011): 240-254.